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SUBJECT: CHAVEZ AND THE EVANGELICALS

Classified By: Abelardo A. Arias, Acting Deputy Chief of Mission,
for Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

Summary

1. (C) The GOV is catering to evangelical Christians, who make up nine percent of Venezuela's population, to build the support base of President Hugo Chavez and to win the August recall referendum. Some Evangelicals have plugged into Chavez's coffers and his social message, at times reflecting an anti-USG bias. Chavez himself sympathizes with Evangelicals, and at least once claimed to be one. Like many his efforts to incorporate segments of Venezuelan society into Chavismo, Chavez's attempt to win over Evangelicals is poorly planned and executed, based more on payoffs than conviction. End summary.

Evangelicals in Venezuela

2. (C) Evangelicals estimate their numbers at around nine percent of the population, or fewer than two million Venezuelans. (Note: Venezuelan Catholics call "Evangelical" all Christian non-Catholics, including Mormons and Jehovah's witnesses. Venezuelan Evangelicals use it as a doctrinal description that includes many mainline Protestant groups which emphasize aggressive evangelization and church-planting.) Samuel Olson, President of the Evangelical Council of Venezuela (ECV), told poloff the number of evangelicals is not growing exponentially as in other countries in the region because of Venezuela's historic high cost of living, which has limited expansion efforts by foreign missionaries.

3. (C) Olson, a Princeton-trained minister and son of Amcitt missionaries to Venezuela, told poloff June 14 Venezuela's Evangelical movement is afflicted by "post-modernism," which he said is characterized by lax personal morals and an emphasis on money and power. Olson also noted that Venezuelan Evangelicals adhere to an "apostolic movement" in which popular Evangelical pastors claim authority over large numbers of churches (or all of Venezuela), often using titles such as "Bishop" or "Apostle." Aside from this relatively new phenomenon, Evangelical churches in Venezuela are largely independent and only loosely affiliated among themselves or with foreign religious organizations.

Evangelical Organizations

4. (C) There are three evangelical confederations in Venezuela that, according to one estimate, incorporate less than half of the evangelical churches in Venezuela. Unlike their Catholic counterpart, the Episcopal Council of Venezuela, the Evangelical confederations do not supervise or regulate member churches. The confederations mostly advocate for religious freedom, collaborate on the training of pastors, and only sparingly wade into doctrinal questions. The confederations, Olson claimed, try to remain apolitical, though Venezuela's acrid political environment often forces responses. For example, Olson was forever branded as an opposition member when he appeared on stage with other religious leaders during the events of April 2002 praying for the victims of the Miraflores slayings. Olson said the prayer event was carried split-screen with the swearing-in of short-lived interim President Pedro Carmona, giving rise to subsequent allegations that Olson had supported Carmona.

5. (C) Olson's ECV was founded in 1964 as a reaction to the signing of the concordat between the GOV and the Catholic Church. The evangelicals worried, Olson said, that the Catholics' relations with the state would prejudice evangelicals. The CEV currently has 160 members, some of which, like the Baptists, have hundreds of individual churches. Olson estimated the CEV represents 4000 individual churches. Among these members are many groups with U.S.

origins, such as the Baptists and Assemblies of God. Olson,

who has presided over ECV for six years, is frequently invited to appear with catholic and Jewish leaders at ecumenical events.

16. (C) The Confederation of Evangelical-Pentecostal Pastors of Venezuela, with around 90 members and 4000 churches, broke from the ECV in 1984. Olson claimed the schism came when some conservative Pentecostal leaders became worried over the ECV's relations with non-Christian religions. Finally, the Union of Christian Churches of Venezuela ("Unicristiana") was formed in the 1990s under the guidance of "Apostle" Raul Avila, an Argentine who pastors the Christ for the Nations Center in Caracas, a church that openly supports President Hugo Chavez. Unicristiana President Elias Rincon told poloff June 18 the confederation comprises some 200 churches.

----- Chavez Courting Evangelicals -----

17. (C) Olson claimed that certain Evangelical ministers have received large amounts of money for their churches in return for their support of the GOV. He said he had spoken with ECV pastors who have been offered housing and pension benefits in exchange for open political support for Chavez. The state television station carries two programs -- free of charge -- of popular evangelical ministers (Note: A Catholic priest also hosts a state television program). State television also carries GOV ads with images of Evangelical church services and of the ten commandments and scripture references. Evangelical Bishop Jesus Ramon Perez, whose program airs Saturday mornings on state television, denied to poloff June 16 that he had received large sums of money. He said his only funding from the GOV came from a work program in which 300 of his congregation members received grants to form work cooperatives from the state development bank, Bades. (Note: The president of Bades is Nelson Merentes, a member of Chavez's Comando Maisanta campaign committee.)

18. (C) Unicristiana's Rincon said his church had received grants from the GOV to help homeless people in Caracas. He claimed that more than 300 people had been reintegrated into regular society via their program, which utilizes Chavez's social "missions." The homeless people, for example, are sent to Mission Robinson's literacy and education classes, and later participate in "Mission Vuelvan Caras" to get job training.

----- A Common Cause -----

19. (C) Bishop Perez described his support for Chavez (he reportedly called Evangelicals to rally to Miraflores Palace to support Chavez during the events of April 2002) as one of a common social agenda. In 1994, Perez signed a "Spiritual Declaration of Independence" with 600 other Evangelical pastors denouncing the GOV's rampant corruption and inattention to the plight of the poor. Perez, who lived on the streets of Caracas as a child, sees Chavez as an answer to his prayer. Perez claims the Catholic Church used its influence with previous governments to persecute Evangelicals, including falsely imprisoning him in 1999 (press reports say the Bishop was involved in a stolen car ring operating in his halfway house for drug addicts).

----- Anti-American Bias -----

110. (C) Rincon and fellow "Apostle" Ramiro Torres admitted their church leans toward support for Chavez, and church teachings have a clear tint of Chavez's social class diatribe. The church's website, in fact, carries anti-American (and anti-Bush) stories taken directly from GOV media sources. Asked why a church website contains only pro-GOV links and news, the two said it was a question of justice: private media is anti-Chavez and the church felt

the need to provide balance to its congregation members. Torres went on to say that the United States is suffering the "wrath of God" for its immorality, citing same sex marriages and the invasion of Iraq, which he said his church opposed. He predicted that the Evangelical Christians of "the South" would help "the North" find its way.

----- Chavez: Evangelical For A Day? -----

111. (C) Claims that Chavez is an Evangelical have surfaced on several occasions. Chavez himself commented in January 2002 that he was an Evangelical, only to backtrack once the media began to scrutinize his claims. Perez, who claims to have had meetings with Chavez, says Chavez had "an encounter with God" while in prison after his failed coup attempt in 1992.

Perez claimed a group of Evangelicals meet regularly in Miraflores, though he did not know if Chavez attended the meetings.

GOV Denies Evangelical Bias

12. (C) Gonzalo Gonzalez, Director of the Office of Worship of the Ministry of Interior and Justice (MIJ), told poloff June 23 that the GOV is not trying to play to Evangelical interests. He said the GOV is attempting to apply the 1999 Constitution, which guarantees religious expression. The traditional GOV funding of the Catholic Church (a by-product of the concordat) is inconsistent with the new constitution, Gonzalez argued and must be expanded to include other groups. Evangelical Bishop Perez told poloff the amounts offered by MIJ are "offensive" in the size of the amounts. (Note: The money from MIJ is only a portion of the funding the GOV makes available to churches, as other ministries such as health and education also fund religious projects.)

Comment

13. (C) Chavez's catering to Evangelicals has all the earmarks of the tendency to seek Bolivarian alternatives to the status quo, in this case the Catholic Church which is one of Chavez's greatest critics. Like many Chavista ideas, however, it seems to be applied with less-than-full efficiency, targeting a few controversial Chavista ministers (whom Olson calls "rejects" of traditional Evangelical groups). Additionally, there is little evidence that the Evangelicals constitute a monolithic voting bloc that Chavez and his supporters could readily exploit.

McFarland

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